

CIA Torture Sites in Poland: Thirty Million Dollars for Torture Victims

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According to the US Senate report into the CIA rendition programme and prisons, US authorities paid 30 million dollars to Polish secret services in return for the opportunity to establish and operate the CIA detention facility in Stare Kiejkuty. The case is currently under investigation. We expect that the official probe will end with the criminal prosecution of people who are responsible for establishing the facility and also those who applied torture on the Polish soil.

Still, thirty million dollars is not an amount of money to be cast aside. It is obvious that we must explain what happened with the sum, where the money went – at least so promises Marek Biernacki, Chair of the Sejm Intelligence Committee. But the amount can also be considered a symbol of the evil perpetrated in the territory of Poland. We can try to make the best out of this evil by using this money to finance a comprehensive state policy on assistance for victims of torture.

For a Pole, torture seems to be an abstract concept, something that appears in reporting pieces or Hollywood films, and affects only villains, meaning “terrorists”. In any case, this happens somewhere far away, in distant countries, and does not concern us at all. Yet victims of torture live close to us, in Poland. These are victims of “old” torture crimes – Polish survivors of concentration camps, gulags or communist prisons. But there are also “new” torture victims – refugees who come to Poland every day from Chechnya, Syria, Afghanistan, Congo and recently – also from Ukraine. Many refugees are victims of torture, people who have been beaten, raped or starved at detention centres and different kinds of camps, and persecuted by armed groups operating in war-stricken areas. Torture still remains one of the most popular ways of forcing one’s testimony or simply taking vengeance on enemy nations, ethnic and religious groups or political opponents.

A person’s history of torture is a very important factor in the refugee recognition process. Still, some victims do not speak about what has happened to them because they are too afraid, too ashamed or want to forget the painful events as soon as possible. The problem is that in Poland there is no system for identification of victims of torture. And that is only the starting point as identification should be followed by quick rehabilitation of the victims. The rehabilitation process should comprise the provision of a comprehensive support – medical, psychological, social and, in certain cases, even psychiatric care – to the victim themselves, but also to their families, which are also affected by the trauma caused to their loved ones. Such a process may take years. The length of rehabilitation depends on the intensity of inflicted torture and the psychological and bodily injuries suffered. Rehabilitation may involve purchases of relevant drugs and access to medical procedures, as well as assistance in finding a job or vocational re-training. Torture victims are able to come back to their normal lives only after the rehabilitation process is complete.

Cinema-goers can observe the challenges associated with rehabilitation of torture victims in the drama *Railway Man*, featuring excellent performances by Colin Firth and Nicole Kidman. The film tells the story of Eric Lomax, a Briton tortured by the Japanese during the Second World War. Years after his wartime ordeal Lomax is a lonely misfit, spending time analysing railway schedules, a man truly broken by his trauma. A woman he meets does not know how to help him, fails to fully grasp the issues that torments the lead character. For Lomax, a way to undergo rehabilitation is to face the past, come back to the place of atrocities and make peace with the tormentor. In real life, such Hollywood-styled happy ends are rare, and virtually impossible in most of the cases.

Centres helping victims of torture are located across the world. They are supported by states, international organisations or private sponsors. The obligation to rehabilitate victims of torture results from a 2012 General Comment (No. 3) on an article of the United Nations Convention Against Torture adopted by the UN Committee against Torture (Poland is a party of the Convention). Pursuant to the Comment, each state should create a comprehensive system for aiding victims of torture. That system should include measures designed to properly identify victims in order to assess and evaluate therapeutic needs of the individuals concerned and provide them

with access to inter-disciplinary measures, such as medical, psychological, psychiatric, integration and social services. This is because a holistic approach must be applied in providing aid to victims of torture, an approach that is custom-tailored to their individual and actual needs, and often goes beyond medical or psychological assistance and includes support in getting new education or integration with local communities, if a need arises.

In Poland, only few non-governmental organisations are involved in such activities. Generally speaking, they struggle every day to survive because the financing available for providers of direct support for victims of torture is scarce. At the same time, the actual needs of such persons are much bigger than the capacities of victim support organisations. What makes matters worse is the fact that Poland has no government-sponsored support programmes for survivors of torture and their families. For authorities, these persons are invisible. They receive the same minimum social benefits as others in need. The rest is their own responsibility. They are often even unaware that rehabilitation is the only thing that would help them. But Polish authorities are not too keen on reminding them about it.

And yet there are countries where fighting with torture and supporting victims of torture have been made a pillar of governmental policy. Denmark, for instance, not only fights for the global ratification of the UN Convention Against Torture but also supports the operations of the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT), a Copenhagen-based umbrella organisation comprising 140 global providers of relief for victims of torture. Danish government also supports the UN Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture, contributing 400,000 dollars each year. In comparison, by 2007 Poland had paid only 5,000 dollars, and has since failed to contribute a single penny.

Our country clearly has a lesson to learn. This lesson is to create a comprehensive assistance programme for victims of torture. The details should be worked out by experts – doctors, psychologists, social workers, NGO activists. It is worth looking at how such aid systems work elsewhere in Europe, which includes a review of the relevant tasks delegated to non-governmental organisations and those remaining within the mandate of public institutions.

A sum of 30 million dollars should be enough to finance such a system over the few years following its establishment. The only thing needed to create that system is a political decision. By way of making such a decision we, as a nation, will be able to express symbolic opposition to the measures used in Stare Kiejkuty and openly admit that there is no place for them in a democratic state and also, and most importantly, help everyone who has suffered from torture. These 30 million dollars could be a sign that Poland takes seriously its obligations under Article 40 of the Constitution and the United Nations Convention Against Torture.

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